

CASNIC

Campaign to STOP the National Identity Card

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How to Debate With People For Maximum Effect

You may often find yourself in debate – sometimes heated – about privacy, Identity Cards, Big Brother, creeping statism and so on. It is not very efficient one-to-one to try to convince someone else of your views because, in general, people are very poor at thinking through their positions and holding logically consistent views. In particular they are notoriously loathe to think from principle. They see this as ‘unbending’ or ‘extreme’. This comes from living in a pragmatic age where principles are routinely thrown out for mood-of-the-moment expediency.

Bottom line? You’ll have your work cut out – but it can be fun.

The Players

Unlike more emotional subjects such as fox-hunting, vivisection, and abortion, it is unlikely that you will come across any vehemently pro-ID card arguments. Most people have not even considered the issue. If they have thought about it at all, they probably have some vague notion that ID cards will ‘somehow’ stop terrorism and crime (in some undefined way) and they might have assimilated, and regurgitate a few ‘sound bites’ such as “If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear.” Or “If it saves just ONE kiddy’s life, it’s worth it.”

Thus you are in competition with apathy and ignorance, rather than passion and certainty. You may also come across the rare person who holds very extreme (in our view) ideas along these lines:

“I would have a chip in everyone’s head controlling their thoughts, if that’s what it took to stop crime.” The more you press this person, the deeper they will dig-in, advocating life imprisonment for a first offence (“They shouldn’t have done the crime if they didn’t want to go to prison.”) and the death penalty for many crimes. They do not think that the current two million spy cameras are anything like enough and would strongly advocate a spy camera in each of our homes, together with a microphone. They would state that only criminals could possibly protest such a move. When you explain that the price of low crime is totalitarian dictatorship, they will agree – **they just want that dictatorship as soon as possible**. Thankfully these people are rare as it is hard to get them to take a more reasonable stance.

In general *most* people won’t have thought about it, *some* will be strongly anti- Big Brother and a few will be mildly pro-Big Brother.

Our best guess is:

80% No real opinion either way, can be swayed depending on the current argument.

18% Anti

2% Pro

This is good news for us as the vast majority of people are open to hearing our arguments and being converted to our point of view. (Contrast with contentious issues such as abortion where most people have firmly held views, issuing from deep moral convictions one way or the other. It is almost impossible to turn a pro-abortion advocate into an anti-abortion advocate, and vice-versa. Not so with our campaign, thankfully.)

How to ‘Win’ an Argument

The objective (in any argument, really) is to try to get the other person to consider your viewpoint, and hopefully **change their own viewpoint as a result of their discussions with you.** The objective is not to ‘win’ the argument and be ‘right’. When you set out to do this, people become alienated and even more firmly wedded to their viewpoint.

Here are a few tips for achieving the desired effect (this also works well for relationship problems at no extra charge! If you master this one, you’ve mastered a BIG life-skill!).

Tip #1: Stay Calm

No matter how impassioned you feel about an issue, it is always alienating to be screamed at, lectured to or spoken to like an idiot. How do YOU feel when someone does this to you? It makes the other person go into ‘protective’ mode right at the point when you want them to listen compassionately to your viewpoint. So, no screaming, wagging fingers, thumping tables or condescension!

Tip #2: No Judgemental Language

Do you want a sure-fire way of making someone switch off to your viewpoint and become hostile and defensive? Use judgemental language and negative labels – or use a tone of voice which *implies* these things.

“Only a fool would believe...”

“What kind of moronic statement is that?”

“That’s just ridiculous and unreasonable.”

“Come off it! You *cannot* be serious, surely?”

“Listen, I’m going to explain this just once more, and s-l-o-w-l-y, ok?”

“That’s the sort of stupid thing I have come to expect from you.”

“Sigh... I’m wasting my time here. I thought you had a bit more intelligence.”

Tip #3: Listen to the Other Person

“I don’t learn anything when I’m talking,” is a very true saying.

What do you most want from your encounter? You want the other person to listen to you considerately, hear your viewpoint, think about it intelligently, then hopefully (and it is a BIG hope) come on to your side, right?

So guess what? The best way to get this is to give the other person the same respect – but this is *so* difficult to do when one of your deeply held beliefs is being challenged.

If they challenge your views, ask yourself a really vital question: “What are they needing right now?” This will allow you to connect to the *person* BEFORE you start giving intellectual water-tight arguments.

Hint: 90%+ of people who take a pro-ID Card stance are acting out of fear. So their need is **security and safety**. They view the world as a dangerous place with criminals and terrorists lurking in every corner. They are frightened and want protection – just like we all want protection. They see the ID card (and many other draconian security measures) as providing them with more safety. Their un-stated motto might be:

“Safety and protection at ANY price.”

Tip #4: Address Their Needs and Concerns FIRST

So before you launch in to the arguments, try to connect with and acknowledge the person’s need FIRST.

Example of Bad Argument

John and Mary are discussing ID Cards. John is mildly in favour.

This sort of response will get Mary nowhere:

John: “I disagree. I think ID cards are great. They will stop these terrorists from attacking us. That’s GOT to be a good thing, surely?”

Mary: “Don’t be stupid! It has been scientifically proven that 89.37% of terrorists do not even have ID on them when committing their acts...blah, blah, blah.”

Now compare with this:

Example of Good Argument

John: “I disagree. I think ID cards are great. They will stop these terrorists from attacking us. That’s GOT to be a good thing, surely?”

(Mary first **hears John’s need** before doing anything else.)

Mary: “So you’re worried about the increase in terrorist attacks recently and you want people to be safe?”

(Acknowledging his need for safety.)

John: “Well yeah! Aren’t you? I mean it’s getting ridiculous. There was that Istanbul bomb, and the World Trade Centre and Jakarta – I mean, who’s safe these days?”

Mary: “You’re worried that terrorists might come into this country and plan attacks and that makes you fearful?”

John: “Well it’s certainly possible, isn’t it? And ID cards would let us know who these people were...”

[OK, John feels listened-to now, and Mary can progress.]

Mary: “Yeah, I want us all to be safe too, and if I thought ID cards would have any significant impact on terrorism, maybe I would support them like you, but you know there is good reason to suppose that not only will they not stop terrorism, they could even *aid* terrorism...”

John: “Huh? How come?”

Now Mary is free to explain this strand of the argument to John.

What a difference that way of talking makes! However, be warned, it is not so easy in the heat of an argument!

[Acknowledgement. We are indebted to Marshall Rosenberg for developing his concept of NVC Non-Violent Communication, on which the section above is based.

Non Violent Communication – A Language of Compassion. ISBN 1-892005-02-6]

TIP #5 Change May Not Come Immediately

Just because you have talked for an hour and that pig-headed fool (to use judgemental language!) still has not changed his mind – does not mean that you have lost. Often people feel the need to stick to their position, even when they know they are defending the indefensible. It’s a kind of macho-thing with men, at least. Maybe later, or next day or next week something you have said will suddenly have an effect and they will come to you and say: “I’ve been thinking about what we discussed last week, and you know, I think you’ve got a point...”

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